

Israel Views Russia's S-300 Sale to Iran with 'Utmost Gravity': PM

JERUSALEM - "Israel views with utmost gravity the supply of S-300 missiles from Russia to Iran," Netanyahu said at a weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday. The Israeli premier added that Tel Aviv "will do whatever is necessary" to protect Israelis. On April 13, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a presidential decree paving the way for the long-overdue delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Iran. The decision to lift the ban comes after Iran and the P5+1 group of countries - the five permanent members of the

UN Security Council plus Germany - reached a mutual understanding on Tehran's nuclear program in the Swiss city of Lausanne on April 2. Moscow had banned the delivery of the system to Tehran in 2010 under the pretext that the agreement it signed with Iran in 2007 was covered by the fourth round of the United Nations Security Council sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program. The resolution bars hi-tech weapons sales to the Islamic Republic. The Russian president on Thursday defended Moscow's decision on



S-300 supply to Iran, saying the system is meant for deterrence amid ongoing developments in

war-torn Yemen. "This is a defensive weapons system. More than that, consider-

ing the situation that is building up in the region, especially regarding the incidents in Yemen, we

think that the delivery of this kind of weapon is a preventive factor," Putin said. (AFP)

Russia Minister Visit to Arctic Island 'Regrettable': Norway

HELSINKI - Norway has demanded that Moscow explain why Russia's deputy prime minister visited the Norwegian Arctic Svalbard islands despite sanctions imposed on him by the EU and Norway. Norwegian Foreign Ministry spokesman Frode Andersen says Dmitry Rogozin's visit was "regrettable," and demanded an explanation as the ministry had informed the Russian Embassy in Oslo earlier this year that people

on the sanctions list "are not wanted on Svalbard." Rogozin's Twitter account on Saturday carried a photo of him purportedly in Svalbard with the text "arrived in Longyearbyen on Svalbard." Andersen said Sunday that the demand to the Kremlin was made late Saturday to the embassy in Oslo, and that Norway was considering "to reinforce measures for travel to Svalbard." He didn't give details. (AP)

Israel Pledges to Transfer Frozen Taxes to Palestinian Authority

RAMALLAH - Israel has agreed to transfer in full hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes collected for the Palestinian Authority but frozen in a row over the International Criminal Court, the Palestinian premier said. Rami Hamdallah, in a statement from his office late Friday, said Israel pledged at a meeting with Palestinian officials to hand over the taxes collected between December and March, amounting to almost half a billion dollars. Israeli officials on Saturday confirmed an agreement was sealed on the taxes, while the media said the transfer of 1.8 billion shekels would take place on Monday. The UN special coordinator for Middle East peace efforts, Nickolay Mladenov, welcomed the deal

as an important step "in the right direction". The Palestinians had threatened to turn to the International Criminal Court over Israel's decision in early January to retain the taxes in retaliation for the Palestinians joining the ICC. The monthly funds account for two-thirds of the Palestinians' annual budget, excluding foreign aid. Israel agreed at the start of April to release the funds after deducting debts due for electricity, water and medical services, a proposal rejected by the Palestinians who insisted on full payment. Hamdallah said the PA, once the funds are received, will firstly pay the April salaries of its 180,000 employees, who have been receiving only 60%... (More on P4...22)

Euro Working Group to Meet, Deal Still Sought: Greek Official

ATHENS - Euro zone deputy finance ministers will meet midweek ahead of a Eurogroup finance ministers' gathering two days later, a Greek government official told Reuters, as Athens and its creditors continue to seek a deal on reforms to unlock aid. "The two sides agreed that there will be a Euro Working Group meeting on Wednesday," the official close to the talks said, declining to be

named. Deputy Ministers of the so-called Euro Working Group, usually prepare meetings of euro zone finance ministers. Athens is stuck in negotiations with its euro zone partners and the International Monetary Fund over economic reforms required by its lenders to unlock remaining bailout funds. Talks are not expected to produce a deal for the approval of euro... (More on P4...23)

Egypt Brotherhood Trial Relied on Single Testimony: HRW

CAIRO - The prosecution's evidence in a trial this month of 51 alleged Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt relied on the testimony of one police officer, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said on Sunday. HRW said the prosecution had presented little evidence to show the defendants did anything other than spread news

about a mass sit-in in Rabaa square in 2013 and organize peaceful protests. The court on April 11 had condemned 14 men to death and 37 others to a life sentence for their actions in opposition to the ousting of Islamist president Mohamed Mursi in 2013 by the military under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is now president. (Reuters)

Wartime Climate in Saudi Puts Calls for Reform on Hold

RIYADH - An electronic billboard at an upscale Saudi mall flashes an advertisement for a designer fragrance before switching to images of soaring F-16s and King Salman saluting the troops. "The response has come to you who threaten the nation," the caption says. "To those who test me, take this war as a reply." The message is directed at the Iranian-allied Shiite rebels in Yemen who have been the target of a three-week Saudi-led air campaign. The nationalist fervor whipped up by the war has put calls for reform in the kingdom on hold as people rally behind their king, the troops and the status quo. State-run newspapers, radio talk shows and TV programs are almost entirely focused on the war against the Yemeni rebels, known as Houthis, with local media portraying it as part of a regional struggle against Tehran and its allies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Saudi human rights activists who consistently speak out about the need for political and societal reforms declined to speak to The Associated Press or did so only on condition of anonymity, saying they fear arrest in the current climate. In neighboring Bahrain, at least three people have been detained for criticizing their country's participation in the Saudi-led campaign.

One Saudi rights activist said she and a group of academics were planning to launch a campaign and release videos this month challenging Saudi Arabia's male guardianship laws, which give men powerful sway over women's lives and require females to seek a male relative's permission to travel abroad or undergo certain medical procedures. The project was indefinitely suspended, with those in charge of its research saying that it was inappropriate to talk about such issues while the country is in a state of war. Another political activist, who is facing trial, said people fear being seen as traitors if they question aspects of the war or press for reforms. For average Saudi citizens like Mohammed Abu Ali, a man in his 60s ... (More on P4...24)

Iran Nuclear Weapons Are A U.S. 'Myth': Khamenei

DUBAI - Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told military commanders on Sunday the United States had created the "myth" of nuclear weapons to portray Iran as a threat, hardening his rhetoric before nuclear negotiations resume this week. Khamenei, the highest authority in Iran, has supported the talks but continues to express deep mistrust of the United States. "They created the myth of nuclear weapons so they could say the Islamic Republic is a source of threat. No, the source of threat is America itself, with its unrestrained, destabilizing interventions," Khamenei said in a televised address to a hall of several hundred military commanders. "The other side is methodically and shamelessly threaten-

ing us militarily ... even if they did not make these overt threats, we would have to be prepared," he said. Political leaders in Iran and the United States have to contend with domestic constituencies skeptical about the outcome of the talks, and Khamenei's comments did not appear to suggest he has withdrawn his cautious support for the diplomatic process. Iran and six world powers including the United States reached a framework accord on Iran's disputed nuclear program this month and will resume negotiations in Vienna this week, aiming to reach final deal by the end of June. The accord was a step toward a settlement that would allay Western fears that Iran could build an atomic bomb,

with economic sanctions on Tehran being lifted in return. Despite significant progress, the two sides still disagree on several issues, including how quickly international sanctions would be lifted under a final deal. Earlier this month, Khamenei insisted that all sanctions be lifted immediately on a deal being reached, a condition that the U.S. State Department dismissed. He warned of the "devilish" intentions of the United States, even as he reaffirmed his support for Iran's negotiating team. The deputy commander of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) on Sunday rejected any inspections of military sites as a "national humiliation", highlighting another area of difference between the two sides. (Reuters)

France Provides First Weapons to Lebanon for IS Fight

PARIS - The first French weapons from a \$3 billion Saudi-funded programme will arrive in Lebanon on Monday as allies seek to bolster the country's defences against the Islamic State group and other jihadists pressing along its Syrian border. Anti-tank guided missiles are set to arrive at an air force base in Beirut, overseen by French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and his Lebanese counterpart, Samir Mokbel. France is expected to deliver 250 combat and transport vehicles, seven Cougar helicopters, three small corvette warships



and a range of surveillance and communication equipment over four

years as part of the \$3 billion (2.8 billion-euro)... (More on P4...25) mod

Yemen Government Rejects Iranian Peace Plan

ADEN - Yemen's government has rejected a four-point peace plan for the country that Iran submitted to the United Nations, a spokesman said on Saturday. Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Arab coalition partners have been bombing Iranian-allied Houthi rebels for three weeks in order to halt advances that could give the rebels full control of the country. The conflict, though rooted in local rivalries, has been described as a proxy war between predominantly

Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran, both top OPEC oil producers. The Iranian plan calls for an immediate ceasefire and end of all foreign military attacks, humanitarian assistance, a resumption of broad national dialogue and "establishment of an inclusive national unity government." "We reject the Iranian initiative," Yemeni government spokesman Rajeh Badi told Reuters by telephone from Qatar's capital, Doha. "The goal

of the initiative is only a political maneuver." Yemen's government and its main supporter, Saudi Arabia, have accused Iran of meddling in Yemen's affairs as part of an effort to dominate the region. Iran denies the allegations. Iran has also dismissed accusations it is providing direct military support to Houthi fighters, Shi'ites from the north who have been closing in on the southern port city of Aden. (Reuters)

Is Shows Purported Executions in Libya of Ethiopia Christians

TRIPOLI - The Islamic State jihadist group on Sunday released a video purportedly showing the executions of some 30 Ethiopian Christians captured in Libya. The 29-minute video purports to show militants holding two groups of captives, described in

a text on the screen as "followers of the cross from the enemy Ethiopian Church". A masked fighter in black brandishing a pistol makes a statement threatening Christians if they do not convert to Islam. The video then switches between footage of

one group of about 12 men being beheaded by masked militants on a beach and another group of at least 16 being shot in the head in a desert area. It was not immediately clear who the captives were or exactly how many were killed. (AFP)

Neighbour News

China Calls for Political Solution to Yemen's Crisis

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for intensifying efforts aimed at finding a political solution to the crisis in Yemen. "The situation in Yemen concerns the security and stability of the Middle East, especially the Gulf region," China's Foreign Ministry quoted Xi as telling Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud during a Saturday telephone call. "Efforts

on the political resolution process for the Yemen issue ought to be speeded up," the Chinese President said. He urged all parties involved in the crisis to accelerate efforts to help ensure stability in the country, stressing that Beijing seeks "to keep in close touch and coordinate with all parties to jointly push for an appropriate resolution at the earliest stage for the Yemen issue". (Agencies)

Pak Trip Like Visiting Home of 'My Own Brother': Xi Jinping

BEIJING - President Xi Jinping said his first trip to Pakistan is like visiting the home of his "own brother" as he vowed to firm up China's strategic ties with its all-weather friend by making progress on various fronts, including the USD 46 billion bilateral economic corridor. "This will be my first trip to Pakistan, but I feel as if I am going to visit the home of my own brother," Xi said in an article for the Pakistani media ahead of his visit. "I look forward to working with Pakistani leaders during the visit to explore the general framework for bilateral cooperation, make substantial progress in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and practical cooperation in other fields and push for the furtherance of bilateral ties at a higher

level," he said in the signed article carried by the state-run Xinhua news agency. Pakistan is the first stop of Xi's first overseas trip this year. The Chinese president is to visit the country tomorrow and Tuesday before attending the Bandung Conference in Indonesia. During his visit, Xi will meet with his Pakistani counterpart Mamnoon Hussain, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and other Pakistani leaders for in-depth exchange of views on bilateral relations and discuss issues of common interest. He is expected to unveil a host of projects under the corridor linking China's Xinjiang province with Gwadar port through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). (Monitoring Desk)

Uzbekistan to Launch New Production of Home Appliances

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan's electro-technical joint stock company Uzeltehsanoat will start production of electrical home appliances of Japan's Shivaki and China's Midea brands at the Motor Plant in Tashkent. The investment projects worth a total of \$13.7 million have been included in Uzbekistan's state program of production modernization and diversification for the period between 2015 and 2019. The projects are expected to launch in 2016 the production of up to 300 thousand refrigerators and up to 250 thousand gas and gas-electric stoves per year. This year the Motor Plant also plans to organize a logistics center of electro-technical

products with a handling capacity of 200 thousand tons a year. According to Uzeltehsanoat, Uzbekistan's producers currently meet only 7 percent of the domestic need for home appliances. The government has tasked the domestic electro-technical industry to increase the figure up to 50-60 percent in five years. In April 2014 the president of Uzbekistan approved the program to develop the electro-technical industry in 2014-2018, which will implement 24 projects to build new and modernize existing productions of home appliances. As part of the program, during the next five years Uzbekistan will increase the production of TV ... (More on P4...26)

Turkmenistan Promotes European Gas Vector

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan - While expecting for the resources of the Caspian region, especially Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, the EU has been actively promoting the Southern Gas Corridor project. A project for the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline construction can be a part of it. Laying the pipe through the Caspian Sea from the city of Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan to the city of Sangachal on the coast of the Absheron Peninsula in Azerbaijan is expected to be one of the variants of this route. Turkmenistan, ranking fourth on the largest natural gas reserves in the world, is one of the key players on the energy

market in the Caspian region and Central Asia. It is interested in searching for new markets, particularly in Europe. In this aspect, the pipeline route to Europe via the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan is considered one of the most attractive ones. The EU, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are negotiating on the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline construction project upon Brussels's initiative. The Turkmen side expressed its readiness to conduct the appropriate environmental expertise with the participation of international experts to implement this project. (Trend)